

(The ramparts, Cape Coast Castle. LETTY enters)

I love the surf beating the rocks! It inspires me to write as I was meant to.

But not tonight. I've had one of my spasms. They leave me so fatigued. Don't fret - I won't play the noble sufferer. I know my heroines pine rather, but, me, I choose to be happy. If that don't suit the world, I'm sorry, it really don't bother me. Not like it did once. That horrid man from *The Wasp*. What did I do to him? Exist? Or was it my fault for flying too near the sun?

I'm running ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning, back in London, when I was barely eighteen.

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(A London Street)

It's the year 20 and Papa's a fair way to ruin. Not that you'd know. My family don't understand retrenchment.

I'm waiting for our neighbour, Mr Jerdan. I hope he comes soon, or I'll grow roots. He's an editor, you see. The *Literary Gazette*. I thought I'd show him my poems. For his candid opinion. He can throw them in the fire if he wants. It's best if they deserve it. But suppose there's some merit in them... Editors pay money for poems.

Mama will kill me for this. It's an inquisition when I bring in the milk. We have servants for that! Not much longer if this don't work.

It don't sound much of a plan, does it? Not when you say it out loud. I don't even know him to speak to. Though he'll always raise his hat to me.

There he is.

Good day, Mr Jerdan.

Take a deep breath, Letty. It's neck or nothing.

Mr Jerdan, sir! I've something to show you.

(She rushes after him and returns)

I did it. I actually did it. And he wasn't cross at all. He even smiled.

Of course he did. It's a wonder he didn't laugh out loud. A foolish girl pushing her nonsense on him. He'll dine for weeks on the story. Oh, my! Suppose he reads them to his friends. I'll die of shame, really I will.

Why should I? He's not heard the castle ravens croak, as his last breath whispers the name of her he could never have. True, I haven't either. But I can imagine it, so it's like I have. Why should his humdrum rule the world? Without passion we're such little beings.

I can say that till I'm as croaky as the ravens. It's Mr Jerdan and his friends decide what we read.

What?

A letter from Mr Jerdan. I won't read it. There'll only be a no in it. Then I've lost all hope, while now I can think maybe, just maybe...

No, swallow the pill and have done.

(She fetches the letter and returns reading it)

I've an elegance of mind peculiarly graceful in a female. That's a compliment I suppose. *(Back to reading the letter)* And a talent to be nurtured. With guidance, I'll find favour with the general public.

That means yes.

Imagine.

'Your work, Miss Landon, quite puts mine in the shade.'
'You're really too kind, Lord Byron.'

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(Letty's room. She picks up a newspaper)

I'm published in The Literary Gazette.

(She kisses the page)

Admittedly it's only in Readers' Contributions. By L. But it's a start. That's what Mr Jerdan says. Provided I follow his advice to the letter.

I will. Though I wish it wasn't all 'Another rewrite, don't you think?'

I want to throw my pen at him sometimes, really I do. Does he sympathise when it still won't come right? Not one bit. Genius, he says, may soar like an eagle, but count the wing beats that take it there. I am. There seem an awful lot of them.

But anything for Mr Jerdan. To think he's bothering with me.

There's a price to pay, of course. But to be published... It's like being in the same room as Byron. I'd pay blood for that. Wouldn't you?

Only... There's something Mr Jerdan wants. I'd say no if I dared, but... As I said, there's a price. I have to publish as LEL. Who'll believe it's me? But he waves that away - pah! If I want to sell I must please The Wasp. The Wasp! I ask you.

*(As the **EDITOR**, who has a markedly different accent)*

No need to sneer, Miss L. Our readers work for a living. They don't care for what you call news. They want to know about people.

So we tell them. If it's a people story, we'll print it - no question.

Take LEL. I don't do favours for Willie Jerdan. He's all pretension and the Wasp hates pretension. But you have to hand it to him - he knows a story. A new poet - a girl, not even twenty. We can use that. And to hide her behind initials - The Wasp is impressed. I can hear readers now. Is she in society? Is she a looker? Is she single?

We can fill columns with this girl. To please our readers. Remember that, Miss L.

*(Back to **LETTY**)*

The Wasp thing really does work. Everyone's asking who is LEL. I want to scream, me. But William says no. Mr Jerdan, I mean. I think of him as William because he spends so much time with me. He needs to now I've my own column. Can you believe that? True, William names the subjects, but once I've proved myself...

(She settles to write)

What is it this time? A factory in Macao! How can I write on that? The task of a poet is to inspire.

He'll say, 'No, Letty, your task is to sell'. It's true - I won't even feed our canary otherwise. But I thought I'd be writing proper poetry. Something to set the soul burning.

I loved him, too, as a woman loves
reckless of sorrow, sin, or scorn
Life had no evil destiny
that with him I could not have borne

Imagine a woman so poetical the words pour out of her. A true improvatrice. But her love is doomed. It has to be - that's what sells.

This won't be a parlour poem. Oh, no. It's for candlelight, when Mama thinks you're sleeping. Though I dare say Mama will be reading her own copy. That sounds boastful, I know, but William says you can't go wrong if you give your readers what they want. I know what I'd want - passion, passion and more passion.

I know. Anyone can be a Byron - until they put pen to paper. Maybe that's true of me. I don't know. But I have to try, I just have to.

Meanwhile, Macao. You didn't think I was going to refuse, did you? There's a fee for it.

(She sets to work)